

Kicking goals in the name of Unity



When it comes to breaking down barriers, it seems nothing speaks louder than a friendly game of football.

The AFP's Islamic Liaison Team (ILT) in Melbourne recently co-hosted a community family day with the Essendon Football Club. The highlight of the day was an Australian Rules football match between police and Muslim youth. More than 3000 members of Victoria's multicultural community came out to watch.

The United Muslim Youth team took on a mixed team comprising members of the AFP and the Victoria Police, with the prize being the inaugural Unity Cup trophy. The game was held at the Essendon training facility at Windy Hill and the two sides were coached by Essendon players Adam Ramanauskas and Bachar Houli.

It proved to be a truly memorable experience for all involved.

ILT Leader, Federal Agent Sam Elmaghraby, says feedback from multicultural communities had been extremely positive and they were looking forward to it becoming an annual event.

"We got people from all around Victoria, and many who hadn't been that interested in football, come to see family members play and they told us afterwards that they had the best time," Federal Agent Elmaghraby said.

"In particular, for some of the women from the Islamic community it was the first time they had seen their husbands, brothers, or sons playing a game of football and they got so much enjoyment out of it," he said.

Federal Agent Elmaghraby said even the umpires were so impressed by the atmosphere and the positive behaviour that they asked if they could come back again next year.

On the field, the United Muslim Youth team did not disappoint its fans, winning convincingly over the mixed police team.

Commissioner Mick Keelty attended the event and helped present medals to the winning team. He said the day was a "win-win" experience for all involved and praised the ongoing work of the ILT for the strong relationships that have been forged with Victoria's multicultural community.

"It was a proud day for the AFP and sets a benchmark for us to follow with similar community engagement events around the country," Commissioner Keelty said. "Sport is an ideal forum to help debunk some of the myths surrounding law enforcement and the day was filled with positive comments about the Islamic Liaison Team."

He further stated that the grassroots connection with communities is particularly important for promoting cohesion and mutual respect in society.

Federal Agent Elmaghraby said the Unity Cup and the ongoing community work conducted by the ILT – such as visiting schools and engaging in regular dialogue with multicultural leaders and community members – had been crucial to improving relations between police and those communities.

"It has changed the way a lot of people think, not just within the Muslim community but the police as well," he said.

"Many community members did not understand who we were or what we did in the past and some even thought our job was to investigate their communities."

"Through this face-to-face contact we've cleared up a lot of that misunderstanding now and our members have also learnt a lot about the Islamic community so there is definitely a mutual respect and understanding there now."

Federal Agent Elmaghraby said this was reflected in the fact that there had been a significant increase in the number of Islamic people showing an interest in becoming members of the AFP.

"We've had a lot more people express interest in joining the AFP over recent times and there has been a big increase in the number of applications received," he said.

Word about the success of the Unity Cup has spread around the nation, with the NSW Australian Football League (AFL) recently inviting organisers to Sydney to discuss establishing a similar event in the western suburbs of Sydney.

"We went up there with members of the Essendon Football Club and spoke to members of the AFL's multicultural program about the day and they took us to meet with various Islamic schools and principals," Federal Agent Elmaghraby said.

"There was a lot of positive feedback and enthusiasm and they embraced the concept because of the success of what happened in Melbourne."

As well as the main football game, the day comprised a 'round robin' football



competition featuring members of different multicultural communities from Victoria, live entertainment, a police expo, children’s activities, a barbecue lunch, and autograph opportunities with Essendon football players.

Several high profile Melbourne identities attended including Essendon Football Club Chief Executive Officer Peter Jackson, AFL Multicultural Project Coordinator Nick Hatzoglou, James Demetrio from Sports Without Borders, George Lekakis from the Victorian



Multicultural Commission, and Hass Dellal from the Australian Multicultural Foundation.

Generous support was received from the broader community, with food and services provided by various Melbourne businesses.

Federal Agent Elmaghraby said some of those who attended the day had gone on to organise various sporting competitions and social gatherings.

“Previously there wasn’t much interaction within these ethnic groups, but now



they are organising football games and barbecues and other outings so it is a really positive outcome all round,” he said.

The AFP is now working to replicate the great success of the Unity Cup Family Day in other states, as part of its National Community Engagement Strategy.



All photos: Stefan Duscio

